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The Revised Educational Programmes and Early Learning Goals

The Early Years landscape is ever-changing and Covid-19 has created huge challenges and much uncertainty for every setting. The reforms proposed before the pandemic to the framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, DfE, 2017) have been further revised to take into account the impact of the disruption to children's early education. The government suggests that the reforms, which will be compulsory from September 2021, provide a strong basis of support for children's learning and development.

The first in a three-part series on the changes to the Educational Programmes and Early Learning Goals (ELGs), this first article focuses on the prime areas of learning and aims to provide positive and constructive support to practitioners in thinking about implementation of the reforms. Whatever your views on the changes, some of which are controversial, and others, easily over-looked, it is important that they optimise children's learning experiences and that busy practitioners can understand how the changes can fit in with current practice and realise opportunities for development.

It is crucial to bear in mind that, like their predecessors, the ELGs are not a checklist. Pedagogy should be child-centred and informed by careful observation of each unique child to meet their learning needs in a developmentally appropriate way.

The Changes

A feature of the changes in each area of learning is an expanded 'Educational Programme' setting out a rationale followed by practice expectations.

Communication and Language

The Educational Programme

The changes here reflect renewed emphasis on the fact that children's language development supports all areas of development. The previous emphasis on children's development of confidence and skills in speaking and listening in a range of situations, has been fortified by emphasising back-and-forth interactions and conversations between children and with adults. The requirement for new vocabulary has been added as key to enriching children's language and the number, as well as the quality, of conversations is highlighted.

These changes reflect the recognition that children need to be active participants in their learning. A language-rich environment is characterised as one which values children's contributions, their interests and their verbal expressions. It invites a child-led approach where adult interventions serve to facilitate children's interactions rather than dominate them.

The new ELGs

The previous three ELGs become two as 'understanding', (previously a separate ELG) is added to 'listening and attention'.

Listening, attention and understanding

Listening attentively and responding are retained as core components of the ELG but there is new emphasis on children engaging in dialogue as the 'range of situations' in the old ELG is clarified as including whole class and small group interactions. Asking 'relevant questions' 'following instructions' and 'answering questions' becomes asking questions to 'clarify' understanding. Once again, there is a shift from potentially passive learning' (children paying attention and sticking to the adult agenda), to more active learning whereby children are encouraged to inquire, thereby asserting their own ideas and perspectives.

Speaking

The ELG regarding children's expressive language has changed significantly and has a number of new features. The use of tenses is retained and making use of conjunctions is added, reinforcing the newly added goal of children using full sentences. This reflects the expectations of greater sophistication in children's utterances including recently introduced vocabulary incorporated into complex sentences.

In line with the changes to Listening, attention and understanding, children expressing *their own* ideas is highlighted. Whereas previously, 'awareness of listeners' needs was prioritised, now, children's own 'ideas and feelings about their experiences' are foregrounded. Awareness of listeners needs is addressed by children 'listening attentively', 'responding' and holding 'back and forth' conversations. The new emphasis on children's self-expression is helpful in supporting their articulation of ideas and motivation to use increasingly complex

language. The previous emphasis on listeners' needs may have unintentionally invited shorter, simpler responses through closed questions and an instructional approach.

Summary of Key changes

- Increased expectations of children's expressive language including the use of complex sentences and new vocabulary
- Greater emphasis on children's articulation of their *own* ideas and experiences
- Emphasis on adult-child interactions and the role of the adult as facilitating children's interactions and modelling new vocabulary

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy:

- Invite children's perspectives and curiosity?
- Support children's verbal interactions sensitively and unobtrusively?
- Incorporate new vocabulary in conversations with children?
- Provide time, space and opportunities for children to interact with one another, one-to-one and in groups?

Personal Social and Emotional Development

The Educational Programme

The changes here reflect the principle that PSED underpins cognitive development and physical and mental wellbeing. The language used has a clear focus on key concepts of social and emotional development and reflects the idea that attachments represent the foundations of emotional development upon which social skills depend.

The practitioner's role is to establish secure attachments with children and to support children's interactions with their peers, including, for the first time, facilitating children's conflict resolution. This recognises the potential for social challenges to build children's skills, with practitioners' intervening when necessary, but otherwise supporting children to manage social challenges independently.

Practitioners are also required to guide and model healthy eating and promote independence in physical self-care.

The new ELGs

The PSED ELGs have been significantly re-organised and developed. The most obvious change is the importing of parts of Health and self-care from the previous Physical Development (PD) ELG. The new PSED ELGs cover self-control, autonomy and relationships. The elements of the previous PSED ELG are retained, but the language is reframed so that it aligns with attachment theory and can easily be linked with the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) (EYFS, DfE, 2017).

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation involves the ability to control one's own emotions. Understanding their own, and the feelings of others' is cited as the key to children beginning to exercise self-regulation. This is new in that it reflects a shift from 'adjust[ing] behaviour to different situations' to *understanding* feelings; not just of others, but *their own*. There is a tacit acknowledgement here that before children can understand how others feel, they need to be able to identify and name their own feelings.

Practitioners can support children here by acknowledging children's feelings without judgement and helping children to name the emotion they are feeling. This approach can help equip children with a vocabulary relating to emotions and support them in beginning to recognise the emotions of their peers.

The other aspects of this ELG involve the ability to delay gratification by controlling impulsivity and sustaining attention and engagement; a clear link with the CoEL (Active Learning).

Managing Self

This new ELG concerns physical as well as emotional independence. Managing their own toileting and dressing is almost unchanged from the previous PD ELG but 'knowing the importance of a 'healthy diet' becomes 'understanding the importance of healthy food choices'. This reflects a new emphasis on children's lived experiences. It recognises that children make choices and so practitioners need to be aware of the choices on offer and

how they support children's understanding of the choices they make. This change offers the opportunity for practitioners to reflect upon the messages conveyed to children about food.

Aspects of emotional development are identified as confidence, independence, resilience and perseverance. These can be directly linked with the CoEL (Playing and Exploring and Active Learning).

A further change is that children *explain the reasons* for rules, rather than 'understand and follow rules.' This change encourages practitioners to *check* for understanding.

Building relationships

A significant change here is the explicit recognition of the need for 'attachments' between children and adults and 'friendships' between children. This reflects the notion that relationships are based on emotions, an element lacking from the previous ELG which used the term 'positive relationships.' It demonstrates an underpinning of the new ELGs by attachment theory.

Finally, the new ELG includes the requirement that children show sensitivity to *their own*, as well as the needs of others which echoes the idea above that before they can understand the feelings of others, children need to be able to identify and understand their own feelings.

Summary of Key changes

- Attachments are emphasised as key to emotional and social development
- Expectations are increased regarding children's abilities to understand and articulate social rules
- Clearer links are made between PSED and the Characteristics of Effective Learning

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy

- Support children in managing and resolving their own conflicts when they encounter social challenges?
- Help children to identify their own feelings and to name them?
- Support children's healthy food choices? Do you take care not to convey ideas about cakes and sweets as treats (good) and vegetables and fruit as necessary but not enjoyable?

Physical Development

The Educational Programme

There is a sharp focus on children being active and 'doing' rather than 'understanding' physical activity in the new PD ELGs. There is a recognition that PD begins at birth and that gross and fine-motor skills are separate but linked.

There are clear implications for practice here in ensuring that physical activity is embedded into children's routines. This includes planned activities as well as free play as children are expected to develop specificity in their movements, gaining increased control and confidence when using tools and in their coordination.

The new ELGs

Gross Motor Skills

Strength and balance when playing are added to coordination as elements of gross motor skills and children are expected to move 'energetically' when engaged in a range of physical activities.

These changes reflect an acknowledgement of play as being central to children's development and legitimise a play-based approach to pedagogy, sensitively supported by practitioners. There is a potential tension between safety concerns and children's energetic play which requires careful risk assessments of physical spaces but practice which recognises children's rights to take risks, and enjoy their physical activity.

Fine Motor Skills

Whilst effective pencil control still features, its use is clarified as 'preparation for fluent writing' rather than writing. This is a small but important change as it mitigates the temptation for formal writing to be taught prematurely. However, a tripod pencil grip is specified as appropriate in *almost* all cases. In addition to writing, the new ELG recognises that drawing is a means to increased fine motor control as are a range of tools including scissors, paintbrushes and cutlery.

Summary of Key changes

- Health and Self-care have been removed from this ELG and self-care is now addressed in the ELGs for PSED.
- Play is emphasised as essential to developing gross motor skills.
- Children are expected to engage in energetic play.
- Increasing precision is highlighted in both gross and fine motor skills.
- Skills rather than behaviours are emphasised.

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy

- Look for opportunities for physical exercise in every area of learning?
- Enable children to choose from a varied range of resources (in addition to mark-makers), which promote development of their fine and gross motor skills?
- Optimise the use of space and support children's energetic play, managing risk in a proportionate way?

